



Critical Purchase in Neoliberal Times

Ien Ang, Miriam Bartha, Bruce Burgett, Ron Krabill

"Critical Purchase in Neoliberal Times" is an edited conversation with Ien Ang and three members of the Cultural Studies Praxis Collective (CSPC): Miriam Bartha, Bruce Burgett, and Ron Krabill. The transcript of the conversation conducted at the University of Washington was reworked and revised by the interlocutors. The document as a whole surfaces and addresses a series of questions about engaged and community-based forms of cultural studies scholarship; multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and media policy; and the future of the transnational field of cultural studies in the context of the neoliberal turn in global higher education.

The conversation is timely since it opens the problematic of the cultural industries to issues that are specific to the university as one site where culture takes place. It locates cultural studies as a critical discourse and practice in the university, but it also encourages its practitioners to learn more about how they can study culture in ways that engage and catalyze collaboration across diverse sectors. In order to promote this learning, we invite readers to send us comments on the conversation.^[1] Following a strategy used by the CSPC in its meetings, we ask each contributor to choose a brief passage, sentence, or phrase that they found useful, provocative, or engaging, and to amplify on its significance in the current moment. Responses will be added to the text.

From Cultural Studies to Cultural Engagement



Miriam Bartha

We thought we'd begin by asking you about the trajectory of your career. Your scholarship has taken up a wide range of concerns, starting with media reception and institutions, then turning toward transnational cultural studies and multiculturalism, and now focusing on cultural research as a form of community engagement, with particular attention to media policy. Can you trace the movement of your interests and concerns for us?



Ien Ang

Within the great variety of the topics I've been working on over the last 25 years or so, there has been both continuity and change. The continuity is that I have always been compelled to address issues that I felt were central to what's going on in society at large. Taking a cultural studies approach to those issues meant questioning some of the dominant assumptions that were circulating, trying to understand the complexities and contradictions involved. *Watching Dallas*, my first book in the 1980s, analyzed the reception of the then famous TV series *Dallas* in the Netherlands. That research project was related at the time to the enormous controversy the series had elicited in the Dutch context. It was seen as a symbol of cultural imperialism, and the discourse of television was very much affected by the enormous success of internationally-

distributed, U.S.-produced programs like Dallas. In looking at the reception of that program by ordinary viewers, I was interested in the perspectives that do not get into the public sphere if we only listen to the chattering classes, the intellectuals who make comments in newspapers and so forth. A lot of cultural studies work is about bringing out such voices and articulating perspectives that otherwise would not be heard.

In 1991, I moved to Australia and turned my attention more squarely toward questions of race and ethnicity. At the time in Australia, there was a prominent discourse regarding Australia's so-called "enmeshment" with Asia. Australia, as the only "Western" country apart from New Zealand that is located in the Asian region, saw that North America and Mexico had developed NAFTA, Europe had the European Union, and wondered, what about us? In response, the idea of the Asian-ization of Australia encouraged a language that mixed an economically-motivated management discourse and an international relations discourse of security. But what are the cultural dimensions of this idea? What does it mean for national identity? What does it mean for people especially of Asian background themselves living in Australia? I thought there was an opening there, too, for new perspectives and new voices, and I was interested in that. Two of my subsequent book projects took up these issues: a monograph entitled *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West*; and a co-edited collection, *Alter/Asians: Asian-Australian Identities in Art, Media and Popular Culture* (2000).

The work that I have been doing since then at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) has focused on community engagement and bringing cultural studies out of the academy, if you like. I became the director of a research center located at UWS called the Centre for Cultural Research, now the Institute for Cultural and Society. UWS has a very strong community engagement commitment to its region. My sense was that the only way that we, as cultural studies researchers, could succeed within that institutional context was by taking community engagement seriously as both a task and an exploration of ourselves - by doing new research in new ways that would bring the knowledge we've developed, in theory and in methodology, into much more collaborative forms of engagement. This turn toward the scholarship of engagement was also a way of trying to unsettle dominant practices of cultural studies, because I think cultural studies as an academic field has become quite complacent - I could even use the word boring - in that its discussions about race, about ethnicity, about gender and sex have become so predictable. We know what people are going to say before they say it. But what happens if we mobilize this type of knowledge in other contexts by engaging with other sectors? That's the question I have become interested in.



MB:

Your narrative highlights a number of salient themes from your work with Australia's Special Broadcasting Service (SBS). That work offers a context in which you can mobilize knowledge and questions in new ways regarding race and ethnicity in both national and transnational frames. You offered a perspective on a specific, local organizational case, but also one that mediated national policies and perspectives, and responded to transnational migrations and flows.



IA:

Yes, indeed. I am concerned with SBS, which is very much an Australian case study. But given that we always work both locally and globally, I have to be able to explain this organization in a way that isn't just specific to that organization. Though the issue of the local and the global has been with us for some time now, it's not always easy to translate from the local to the global, and in our own practice we realize this much more.



Bruce Burgett

I want to dig into that argument about the local and the global by linking it to your reference to cultural studies research methodologies. In the arc of your career there's a continuous argument for the necessity of ethnographic work in cultural studies. You

began by doing a reception ethnography - and not just a textual interpretation - to tell us what a show like Dallas means and does in a transnational frame, and you have now extended that to an organizational ethnography of SBS. It seems that there are some real consistencies here, but also some moments of change. I'm particularly interested in the organizational context and scale of your own work. In that regard, could you say a little more about the institutional context of what you're doing at UWS and with the Institute for Culture and Society? What's working, what's challenging, and what do you see developing?



IA:

Well, I'm a big believer in turning necessity into opportunity. In terms of research, my methodological inclination has always been ethnographic. I'm interested in the details of a situation, details that may seem meaningless but, put together as part of a big puzzle, yield a rich description of what the situation is like. That description then has to be put into the context of a larger narrative or argument; that's where the big picture comes in. It's not about description for description's sake. For example, I became interested in the practice of subtitling and how it was introduced within SBS as an adaptive response to the mandate of multicultural broadcasting. A lot of people didn't think that was an important topic at all. But by describing the decision-making processes that were happening around those practices, you can show exactly how they say something much broader and much bigger about cultural politics, in this case about language, power, and intercultural relations. We discuss these dynamics in a chapter of our book *The SBS Story* (2008).

At the same time, I don't necessarily make a distinction between an ethnography of audience reception and an ethnography of an organization. They are different sides to different problematics, perhaps, but the method is consistent. Studying audience reception suggests how ordinary people make meaning in everyday life. An organizational ethnography focuses on how organizations make themselves work in everyday life. I'm interested in the relationship between those two, how everyday life gets organized and lived and how institutions have an impact on that. Ideally speaking, those two elements would always have to be interrelated or at least co-articulated for us to understand contemporary cultural relations at any level of scale.



BB:

In the work of the Institute, I'm wondering if you're developing different modes of engagement with these same methods. When you partner with an organization such as SBS, doesn't that locate your research practice in a more complex institutional context? I ask because much of what you're describing echoes discussions of engaged or cross-sectoral forms of cultural studies in the United States, including what we are doing at UW Bothell with our Master of Arts in Cultural Studies or at UW Seattle with our graduate Certificate in Public Scholarship. On the ground, the discourse of cross-sectoral engagement can mean everything from enhancing purely neoliberal forms of economic development to working with progressive and radical grassroots community organizations. That neoliberal environment creates a very different setting for research, especially compared to what cultural studies practitioners were doing in the late 1980s.



IA:

Oh, yes, absolutely. At UWS, this work is a financial necessity: we only do projects if we can get research grants for them, and getting research grants is the performance indicator that gets acknowledgement within our university system. Some grant schemes specifically encourage this mode of cross-sectoral research and they have been in existence since the late 1990s, the idea being that academic researchers could and should attempt to make their work useful by collaborating with organizations outside academia. In the past, most of these grant schemes targeted science and technology researchers, not so much qualitative social science researchers, and certainly not humanities researchers. One of the motivations - the economic motivations - for doing this research was simply to see whether we could exploit these grant opportunities for

our own purposes. But when you take that path, it's important to maintain intellectual integrity, because we found it easy to make links with different organizations and community groups. The problem was to make sure that we chose those projects and those organizations that we could work with. Otherwise, community engagement very quickly becomes an expedient activity. We had to learn that the hard way. Now we are much more cautious in making links. The most important element is to ensure that you work with people, organizations, or groups with which you have some political, intellectual affinity in terms of objectives and interests. You have to be able to have a conversation on an equal footing; you have to be able to develop trust; you have to feel able to learn from them, and not just that they can learn from you. That's absolutely crucial.



MB:

One of the consequences of perceiving partnerships to be opportunistic or instrumental, on either the university's or the community partners' part, can be a deep and abiding skepticism regarding these kinds of collaborations, particularly the political stakes and consequences of engaging in them. Have you encountered skepticism of this nature, and if so, how have you worked with it?



IA:

Of course there can be a lot of opportunism, on both sides. We've encountered it when a community group, or even a wealthy museum, would approach us with an invitation to work together that essentially amounted to a cheap way of getting research done. Had they contracted with a consultancy company, they would have paid much more. That's a risk you run in a situation where there's no real intellectual exchange going on. So the skepticism is necessary, I think. There are always different perspectives and interests. It's the moment of encounter that has to work well, and things need to be discussed appropriately. In any partnership, there are things you can talk about because your perspectives overlap, but other things you simply can't talk about because your perspectives diverge. That's a fact of life, and that's where people can become skeptical. But we always have to live with a dose of skepticism, whatever we do.



MB:

Clearly context is everything here, but it's also true that skepticism on the part of community groups is often the legacy of their historically uneven partnerships with university researchers. Actually engaging with that skepticism, that legacy, can be an opportunity for learning and shifting practices on both sides.



IA:

Yes, that's true. And it depends on what kind of organization it is. For many grassroots community organizations, a university is a scary institution. They might feel empowered by their encounters with it, or they might feel like they need to try to get as much as possible out of it. They might feel intimidated or unable to express their own perspectives. Those power relations really need to be addressed in some way. It's a question of diplomacy.



Ron Krabill

Let me speak to the other side of that dynamic. In the U.S. context, when you go out and talk about this kind of work, depending on the audience, sometimes you get a very predictable and critical response. Most forms of engaged and community-based cultural

studies can be spun as contributing to the neoliberalization or instrumentalization of a more critical cultural studies practice. Do you get the same kind of response in Australia or elsewhere, and how do you reply to it?



IA:

I haven't received that response directly, but an element of it is true. For me, the question is not so much about the neoliberalization of cultural studies, as it is about how cultural studies can survive in neoliberal times. We do live in neoliberal times. The question is how can we produce practices that maintain some critical purchase, and some political values that we are committed to. And that is always a question of compromise, I think, a question of negotiation. I don't have a lot of time for people who say that we have to remain pure. In my view, too many cultural studies academics are too content and self-satisfied with the production of critique, the more theoretically sophisticated the better. I believe that for cultural studies knowledge to be socially useful, we need to move beyond cultural critique; we need to develop what I call in my introduction to the "Navigating Complexity" special issue of the journal *Continuum* "cultural intelligence" (2011).



RK:

The other response that we've gotten from people, academics and others, is to raise the question of what is new about this type of scholarship. There have been similar sorts of struggles between "basic" and "applied" research in the natural and social sciences for decades, including the emergence over the last decade or two of community and participatory research methods, norms, and strategies. Is there something new about this turn toward engaged research? Could it also be described as an export of funding mechanisms typical of the natural and social sciences to the humanities, or is there something distinctive?



IA:

I don't really care if this is a completely new model or not; I think it is a new practice within cultural studies. In other words, what is new is the specificity of cultural studies knowledge and expertise. Quantitative and positivist social scientists offer a very different kind of expertise, and it can be very useful. But the kinds of knowledge and expertise cultural studies researchers bring to a collaboration are quite specific and also, for lack of a better word, quite vague. That's a learning curve in itself.



RK:

I agree. At the same time, so much cultural studies research has focused on the radical critique of the institution of the university. The moment when that critique rubs up against the kinds of practical concerns you talk about is full of tensions and questions, compared to other fields that may not have oriented themselves around critique in quite the same way. You've been asking us to think about cultural studies in a very pragmatic way, when the tradition of critique pushes us toward a very purist form of critique and critical theory. For me, this raises a pragmatic question. If the relationship between the university and the community-based organization doesn't effectively avoid all forms of repression, should we abandon it? The risk inherent in this question is that you're never going to have any partnership with anyone, with the exception of other university researchers in your professional field.



IA:

In that sense, I'm very much with Stuart Hall: I do believe that practices are not pre-determined, that there are no guarantees, and that it's really the articulation of the practice in the moment that matters. You have to be on top of what's going on and try to be vigilant and self-reflexive. This is much harder political work than the work that is merely expedient or that takes for granted its own critical radicalness. Here, the question and the decision is always of the moment, always conjunctural - is this the right thing to do? What are the ethical and political issues involved? Pragmatism is not easy to choose.



MB:

That makes sense, but pragmatism also raises the question of outcomes and impact, and how you measure them. To pick up on that: we've been talking about creative forms of grants-funded university-community partnerships. One of the demands that routinely accompanies this sort of initiative is assessment, which implicitly or explicitly raises questions of what is valued, who frames the criteria of value, and what measures count. How have you worked with these questions in the context of community collaborations?



IA:

That's a very hard one. As the director of a research center, which has to perform according to certain standards in the university, I often adhere to quite conventional academic standards. Community engagement can become so time-consuming, so absorbing, that the translation back to the academic context is sometimes forgotten. Students and researchers need to think about what their work means for scholarship and for knowledge production in the academic context. That's where the difficult issues of assessing people emerge.



MB:

And do you see any of these mechanisms shifting to include other forms of assessment or other perspectives that may not be coming solely from inside the academic institution?



IA:

In Australia, there has been an effort to introduce a nationwide research assessment exercise. The first version was called the Research Quality Framework (RQF). This effort failed, but it's still instructive. The RQF was supposed to assess research units, including our center, based on overall quality and impact. Quality, in this context, refers to academic quality, and is measured quantitatively by counting the number of your scholarly publications, the amount of grant income you have earned, and so on. Impact assessment was conceived differently, and occasioned a major discussion at the national level. The proposed outcome in the RQF was that we would have to write and submit a narrative about our impact, using case studies. This is very suitable for humanities-based centers because it does not measure impact using presumably objective criteria, let alone the types of impact that might be more measurable within the natural and physical sciences. Instead, it honors the narrative you provide: we worked together with this organization; as a result of our collaboration, this, and this, and this has happened within that organization, and that can be seen as the impact of our research. The new minister after the change of government in 2008 did not like this more subjective evaluative strategy at all, so the whole impact assessment effort was discarded. Which I thought was a shame, although it looks like it is going to be reintroduced in the coming years.



BB:

There are also outcomes-based forms of assessment and evaluation criteria that can get written into the beginning of a project, negotiated in advance with the partners in the project. The positive spin on this type of assessment, which is also very labor intensive, is that if you do it right then it can really improve a project along the way and make it more reciprocal. This is opposed to forms of assessment that tend to be more summative and to happen only at the end of a project or collaboration.



IA:

That's true. In a lot of our projects there are milestones or achievements that aren't assessments necessarily, but are indicators. For example, you might produce a report, or an exhibition, or organize a community forum—activities, apart from academic publications, that are integral to the projects.



RK:

Has the expectation of that assessment moment ever changed who you considered partnering with on the front end - especially if the outcomes are mandated by the state? I'm imagining that if you're collaborating with a politically radical group, the success of that group and project could look like a failure from the perspective of the state.



IA:

That's an interesting question. We haven't really collaborated with overtly political groups. Most of the groups we work with have progressive objectives, but they're not political in the sense of explicitly advocating certain political changes. I think all collaboration works best if it's not driven by ideological motives. A lot of cultural studies is very ideological, as you know, but my practice really works against that. I think it's important to say that when we do research and develop knowledge there's no guarantee of what the outcomes will be. We're not there to develop knowledge that will make an organization look good. The inquiry has to be open and the research independent. There should not be any guarantees in advance.

Multiculturalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Media Policy



RK:

Perhaps we can explore the question of progressive political and research agendas through your own work at the intersection of media policy, television, and critical multicultural studies, and specifically what you've referred to as a "cosmopolitan multiculturalism" supported by media policy. Cultural studies has explored the subtle influences of hegemony or governmentality, with the result that in talking about specific policies we're often looking for these nuances and their consequences. But how do we create media policy that nurtures or allows for a transformational shift in how media takes place?



IA:

Of course there are many different scales of media policy. The most visible operate at the macro-level: the national media policy level; the debates about the future of public service broadcasting; the introduction of digital television; the funding for new communications technologies. That is the background of what is going on. But I'm more interested in the micro- and meso-levels of media policy where, assuming the relative stability of these institutions and media organizations, we can look at how they can operate in a way that is faithful to certain political and cultural objectives. In the case of SBS, for example, I am interested in how an organization that was established in

the 1970s with its multicultural mission can still be relevant for the 21st century, and how that relevance can and should be translated into particular media practices.

Cosmopolitan multiculturalism is something else again. With SBS, I was lucky to find a site for research and engagement that brought together my interest in media policy, institutions and culture, and difference and diversity. To my frustration, the articulation of multiculturalism and public broadcasting was never really spelled out in Australian discussions of SBS. People would talk about it as a direct expression of multiculturalism without looking at the specificities of media culture. But when you look at the specificities of media culture, you can see that through media, through television, cosmopolitan versions of multiculturalism are produced more easily because of the public broadcasting service mandate. A lot of multiculturalism is quite segmented, as you know, and directed to separate groups. Public service broadcasting has to engage some of those particularist tendencies but it also counters them by aiming for a general or national audience. It has to develop a much more interactive version of multiculturalism that's about exchange, exploration of the other, engagement with the other, and debate and discussion, rather than identity politics in the narrow sense. That's where the cosmopolitanism comes in.



BB:

I wonder how that argument plays out in contexts like the United States where the social democratic state has been under siege, even as the discourse of multiculturalism has been on the ascent. Does multiculturalism risk becoming allied with the neoliberal attack on the state? How does that change shift the challenges of multicultural politics in the context of SBS?



IA:

The social democratic state definitely is withering, but in Australia support for public service broadcasting will still be there, even now that the government is much more neoliberal. One reason is that Australia is a much smaller country. There is no way that media can operate exclusively on a market basis if you want to have diversity of media, so government support will always be there. But in terms of multiculturalism as a social democratic policy, neoliberal elements are definitely shifting the emphasis to market forces, privatization, and market driven welfare provision. The relationship between government services for immigrant settlement and SBS is quite a distant one, however, because SBS is a separate, independent organization.



BB:

I find quite compelling the way you describe SBS's impact as creating one model of what a cosmopolitan multiculturalism could be and require. Expanding on this, I'm curious about how your work with SBS has reshaped your thinking about the relation between the cultural and the political. Has your engagement with SBS led you to reimagine the space of the political in the field of cultural studies?



IA:

I think the political in cultural studies is always the politics of negotiation, though a lot of cultural studies scholarship has been focused on the politics of resistance. Negotiation brings us back to issues like pragmatism and compromise. I like the term used by Michael Herzfeld (2005), an anthropologist who writes comparative ethnographies, of the "militant middle ground." It's the middle ground that we have to occupy, but it's a militant middle ground, and we need to hold on to it militantly. It's precisely there that all the conflicting and intersecting forces meet, and it's there that we have to work out a livable and sustainable situation for whomever is part of that situation.



BB:

That phrase, the militant politics of the middle ground, is very interesting. Is there a way we might link it to our earlier discussion of the redistribution of how knowledge is made and how creative resources are distributed across collaborations and partnerships?



IA:

Yes. It is through the practice of collaboration that certain objectives and values are articulated. That's a good way of putting it, that these collaborative projects are really about the circulation of knowledge and through that circulation, dialogue and exchange can create new knowledge that is relevant for that particular context. Later on you can use it to develop broader knowledge that can then be translated to broader contexts.



BB:

That response echoes your argument in two essays - "Who Needs Cultural Research?" (1999) and "From Cultural Studies to Cultural Research" (2006) - where you draw on the work of Michael Gibbons and his colleagues in *The New Production of Knowledge* (1994). Their work suggests that for several decades now universities have been producing more researchers than they can absorb in their own employment bases. One result has been the appearance of research centers in other sectors which, in turn, creates a knowledge geography where new cross-sectoral partnerships can take place. The interesting thing is that *The New Production of Knowledge* concludes with a pretty dire picture of the future: new knowledge partnerships will become increasingly unequal; funding will become more centralized; research will become more elite across sectors; and knowledge production will be increasingly monopolized, rather than redistributed. You rely on the same sociological analysis and your Institute is clearly working in this type of environment, but the political trajectory moves in a different and more egalitarian direction.



IA:

That's true, I think. Gibbons describes the dominant global trajectory, and we try to go against that grain where we can, although I am under no illusion that we will in any way be a counter-hegemonic force. In Australia some elite research centers, like so-called Centres for Excellence, and especially in the sciences, get huge amounts of money. Institutes like ours want to be able to compete for those stakes, but you can do other things with that money. It's the circulation of knowledge, the redistribution and the democratization, that we try to focus on. But this is only possible in limited ways; we too need to pursue a certain elitism and increasingly so because of the requirements imposed on us by the research quality assessments we discussed earlier. That is the constant struggle. I should also say that now that we are an institute, rather than a centre, the emphasis of our work has become more conventionally academic. We still do community-engaged research, but it is only part of what we do, and I have to fight hard to keep our researchers motivated to do it, given that the rewards are so elusive.



BB:

And that's a very significant shift from earlier cultural studies work that used key words like "resistance," "reform," and "rebellion."



MB:

It also requires a different understanding of the practical politics of scholarship, and new strategies for representing this form of critical labor. The essay and monograph don't tend to capture the politics of negotiation very well.



IA:

No, they don't. This is still an open question for what's now being called the scholarship of engagement. The university wants engaged scholarship to happen, and a lot of people are trying to do it. But an academic helping an organization by writing their annual report is just providing a service, what in the past was called outreach. Scholarly engagement has to be something different. It has to have the theoretical and conceptual rigor that merits the name of scholarship. I'm not saying this because I believe it in absolute terms, but simply because it's strategically necessary. It's a survival mechanism because at present, the academic world is still completely dominated by old-fashioned values, scholarly values, and we have to engage with those as well.



RK:

I wonder if there's a link between this negotiation between two forms of scholarship and the tendency we were talking about earlier concerning the move toward larger, more powerful, more elite research centers. What could potentially develop is that large centers have more space for researchers who maintain and reproduce the values legible to that old-fashioned scholarship while they also push its boundaries and limits. At the same time, the more interesting work may come from smaller centers that can be more nimble and create different kinds of cross-sectoral partnerships with grassroots organizations that then feed new kinds of scholarship that become legible in the bigger centers.



IA:

Yes. It depends a lot on the people who do it and it depends on leadership and vision, which is management talk, but a lot of it really works like that. At SBS, the same story applies. It depended very much on a few people who put everything into the organization and made it something worthwhile. In this context, the push towards professionalization was very important. This is relevant to research centers like ours—professionalization in the media world is equivalent to scholarly quality in the academic world. You have to support innovations that find new ways of doing this work, and you have to maintain credibility in the world in which you want to intervene, all at the same time.

Futures of Cultural Studies



BB:

Your recent writings would seem to exemplify the shift you've been describing. In them, you're documenting the research you're doing at your Institute, and also placing it within an academic research conversation about what does and should constitute research. It makes perfect sense to me that part of the work of a single project would be creating something that is useful for that organization—SBS—and also something that transforms how we think about research practice in an academic field like cultural studies. That's the step beyond the previous cultural studies, in which the last sentence of every article typically implored readers to move from theory to practice. Now that sentence appears at the end of the first paragraph. There's less throat-clearing. Following through on that shift requires a more hybrid style of academic work.



IA:

I think so, too. The 1990s were the period of theory with the big T. That's really over now, and people are starting to find new ways of doing useful work across academic and non-academic contexts. It's quite interesting to see that and it's encouraging that younger scholars are interested in doing this kind of work too.



RK:

As someone who did the scholarship of engagement as a graduate student and assistant professor, I need to ask this question. What are the issues of sustainability that arise as a result of this shift, particularly for untenured scholars on the tenure-track, on the cusp of something old and something new? Or for graduate students, if the ideal scholar now writes both an annual report and a dissertation? How should we think about the sustainability of a practice-oriented, community-engaged cultural studies of engagement? The risk is that it becomes another form of academic speed-up - more teaching, more research, more service - especially for junior scholars.



IA:

Yes, that's absolutely true. It's one of those things that needs to be addressed and hopefully it's not just going to be addressed by the senior scholars, but also by the junior scholars themselves, in collaboration. Within the university, rules and guidelines and the kinds of assessment criteria we talked about earlier need to be looked at and changed, and that in itself is a struggle.



BB:

Rethinking assessment criteria is critical. But I also worry that the story of the "old" and the "new" sometimes assumes that there's a generic graduate student or junior faculty member out there who is doing traditional research and then has to do something else. Another way to tell that story is that that generic figure of the graduate student gets created by weeding other potential graduate students out of graduate education. Or that the institution has taken that student and cultivated one possibility or two possibilities in him or her rather than multiple possibilities. So while the worry about speed-up is justified, it's also important to think about broader forms of professional development in this context and about who gets into the pipeline of academic institutions. Other students might say, well, I did graduate school for a year but it wasn't for me, so now I'm going to work in a community-based organization instead. That frames an either-or choice rather than a set of intersecting possibilities.



RK:

Absolutely. From my perspective, that's what makes the institutional politics of assessment and evaluation so critical. The burden of transformation needs to rest on the institution, not just the individual, even as individuals work together to push for those changes.



BB:

And this discussion of practice, collaboration, and research brings us back to the two future-oriented questions with which we'd like to conclude. As you think over your extensive experiences working with and across diverse constituencies, what have you learned about what works well in collaboration, inside and outside of academic institutions, and what doesn't work?



IA:

A lot depends on the people who happen to be working together. People have to be able to get on, people have to be able to have fun together - all of these relatively mundane things are absolutely important. At the Institute for Culture and Society we haven't done everything perfectly. It's probably easier to talk about what can go wrong in collaboration than what goes well. There's noticeable tension, for instance, between senior scholars and junior scholars, because the senior scholars frequently take principal roles in running the programs, doing many different things at the same time. The result is that they don't have quality time to spend on the projects, where the junior scholars are most active. In terms of collaboration, then, we need to examine the logistics of collaboration, the practical ways in which people can actually make time for these projects.

The other problem that I see is fragmentation. This problem is very much related to cultural studies research, precisely because it is such a flexible intellectual practice and can engage with so many areas of practice and professional contexts. In our case, we have people working in the tourism area, people working in the healthcare area, people working in the road safety area, people working in the museum sector, people working with local government. With all these different organizations involved, you can generate a kind of centrifugal effect. The question is, as cultural researchers, how do we come back together? How do we bring all those experiences back to the Institute and develop those cross-sectoral conversations and exchanges to enrich the more substantive theoretical and conceptual research? That's a challenge. I'd say that the de-centering of Centres and Institutes is one of our problems.



BB:

This insight may also apply to the de-centering of cultural studies, which raises our second question: As you look toward the future, what do you see as compelling for those of us who work in cultural studies and are interested in developing collaborative and cross-methodological projects, specifically in arts and cultural arenas, and through arts and cultural practices? If you were to place a wager, where would you lay a bet on the future of cultural studies? Where do educational institutions, including universities but not only universities, fit into that picture?



IA:

I find it interesting that interdisciplinarity is increasingly being seen as the place where innovative work is happening, even in the most conservative universities. In that sense, the kind of work we do in newly formed or more marginal institutions might turn out to be in the vanguard. Those in older institutions have to constantly break barriers. That costs a lot of energy. We don't have to do that because we already work together. It'll take a few decades at least to see how this will pan out in the future, because universities change very slowly.



BB:

That makes sense to me since we're talking about cross-sectoral collaboration, inside and outside of the university. Interdisciplinarity is one way to think of cross-sectoral work within a university, not only between academic disciplines, but also among different academic and non-academic units on university campuses. Centers are places where that interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral work can be incubated.



RK:

But then the question Ien was just talking about becomes really interesting. If the center becomes one of the main ways of creating interdisciplinary research, how do you keep the center flexible enough to create meaningfully interdisciplinary activity without de-centering it to such a degree that you lose that common cause?



IA:

Yes, that's a risk, especially if the game requires that you continually develop new projects. But it's also exciting. I think environmental issues, for example, are going to be really important, and I can imagine working more with scientists and engineers on future projects. This type of collaboration would represent a move toward a much more profound interdisciplinarity, and we haven't done that much yet. I guess that's one wager I'd be willing to make about the future.



BB:

No doubt, though, that wager could open a whole new conversation and would require that new collaborators be brought to the table. For now, let's end here by thanking you, Ien, for this conversation. We appreciate this opportunity to reflect on these questions and issues with you.

Notes

1. **Readers interested in commenting should send their contribution to Miriam Bartha (mbartha@uw.edu) and Bruce Burgett (bburgett@uw.edu). Please limit comments to 500 words and include a brief biographical note (75 words). Comments will be reviewed and edited prior to publication.**

Bios

- **Ien Ang is Director of the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Western Sydney. She is the author of many books and articles, including *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (1985), *Alter/Asians: Asian-Australian Identities in Art, Media and Popular Culture* (2000), *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* (2001), *The SBS Story: The Challenge of Cultural Diversity* (2008), and an edited special issue of the *Continuum: Journal for Cultural and Media Studies*, entitled 'Navigating Complexities' (2011).**
- **Ron Krabill: is Associate Professor and Associate Dean for Graduate Education in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington Bothell.**
- **Miriam Bartha is the Associate Director of the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington Seattle, affiliate faculty in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington Bothell, and co-director with Bruce Burgett of the UW's graduate Certificate in Public Scholarship.**
- **Bruce Burgett is Dean and Professor of the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington Bothell. He is the President of the Cultural Studies Association, the Chair of the National Advisory Board of *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*, and the co-director with Miriam Bartha of the UW's graduate Certificate in Public Scholarship.**

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